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INSTRUCTOR:

LESSON: Wildland Fire Decision Support System – Incident Commander

COURSE: S-300 – Extended Attack Incident Commander
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Emphasis: introduce concepts of WFDSS decision support and available tools that could assist an IC in assessing the fire environment. Introduce process and adherence to WFDSS decision in managing an incident

OBJECTIVES:

Upon completion of this lesson, participants will be able to:

1. Describe the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS).

2. Identify the multitude of support tools and how they can be utilized to support incident actions.

3. Identify the IC's role in providing or utilizing information contained within WFDSS.

I.   INTRODUCTION

WFDSS is designed to establish a process for documenting strategic decisions, provides decision support, and facilitates the development of either short- or long-term management plans. The WFDSS process is linear, scalable, and progressively responsive to changing fire complexity and provides a consistent decision analysis and documentation process for all types of wildland fires. WFDSS provides a platform for risk-informed decision making.

Documentation and analysis of wildland fire management decisions has been required by federal agency policy for nearly 30 years. The 2009 Policy Implementation Guidance requires-

> "Managers will use a decision support process to guide and document wildfire decisions. The process will provide situational assessment, analyze hazards and risk, define implementation actions, and document decisions and rationale for those decisions."

The Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) has been developed to meet this need. The Forest Service (FS), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) enter all fires into WFDSS, regardless of size. National Park Service (NPS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) enter fires into WFDSS only when it escapes initial attack. At 98% initial attack success, there may not be a lot of need for analysis to inform decisions. However as incidents escape initial attack or are managed for multiple objectives more analysis is needed to inform the decision.

II.   WHEN A WFDSS DECISION IS NEEDED

It is recommended that a decision be considered if;

- Wildland fires are no longer following the initial action defined by the Fire Management Plan (FMP), or
- Fire continues to actively spread beyond a few burning periods, or
- Wildland fires are being managed or considered for multiple objectives, or
- Prescribed fires exceed prescriptions and are declared wildfires

Decision-making associated with managing wildland fire can have critical impacts. It is important to make the highest quality informed decisions possible facilitated by factual information and prediction of the range of outcomes and associated consequences of the decision. Publishing a decision provides documentation of the management action taken on the fire and the rationale behind it which will provide support if the fire is litigated in the future.

III.   WHAT IS WFDSS?

WFDSS is designed to be consistent with accepted models of risk-informed decision making. WFDSS is a web based system that allows users to acquire information, analyze that information, apply that information to inform their decision and gain situational awareness, then to archive the decision and the documentation. To accomplish this, WFDSS maximizes the use of appropriately-based deliberation as well as analysis. It is an iterative, information-goal directed process.

> **Risk–informed decision making -** requires two distinct but linked processes:
>
> 1. **Analysis:**
>   - Rigorous, replicable methods to provide information about factual questions.
>   - Brings new information into the process – **informs deliberation.**
>
> 2. **Deliberation:**
>   - Discussion, reflection, and persuasion to communicate, raise, and collectively consider issues, increase understanding, and facilitate substantive decisions.
>   - Brings new insights, questions, and problem formulations – **frames analysis**.

Examples of decision making at this level involve developing a strategic alternative and objectives for a wildfire incident; consider a range of values, hazards and probabilities and focus on longer time periods. They are usually completed at least once, but may require revision, adjustment or a completely new decision as the incident evolves and conditions change.

IV.   YOUR ROLE IN WFDSS

As an IC you may be asked to provide input to develop, amend, or implement the decision process. Knowledge and understanding of the risk-informed decision-making process will be critical. Continual growth and learning throughout your career to stay abreast of how tools have changed, how they are interfacing with WFDSS, and how your input might be incorporated in decision documents will be a necessity.

As a Type III IC you are inherently becoming involved in transitioning up to or down from higher level incident management teams and dealing with what may become longer duration events where risks, values, costs, and probability of success all must be weighed in developing management strategies. Without your understanding of these processes and involvement in the strategic planning process relevant data may be missed.

While you may have been delegated authority to manage the incident or are dealing with an emerging incident, wildfire decisions are inherently complex, and decisions made from a single perspective and single base of knowledge without supplemental input cannot hope to capture and address that complexity. Decision makers should involve those people who provide the best information about:

• Fire behavior and fuel condition,
• Fire effects and resource impacts or benefits,
• Cooperative relationships,
• Firefighter capabilities,
• Any other areas of expertise relevant to the situation.

It is the responsibility and duty of the IC to factor in all the best available information to designing your tactics and implement the decision as it has been delegated to you.
On large, complex wildfires the Strategic Operational Planner (SOPL) position may be assigned to the Incident to work on developing a long-term course of action. SOPL's are specifically trained in developing long-term plans for wildland fires, and are useful on any wildland fire lasting more than three days regardless of the incident's strategic objectives (protection and/or resource benefit).

It is important to note that in some cases WFDSS decisions may be ongoing while you are making tactical decisions. If a WFDSS decision has not yet been published it is important to understand the management strategy. Once available it is essential that you understand the decision and operate within its guidelines as it truly represents the leader's intent and should be the reference with which you manage the incident.

V.   ELEMENTS OF WFDSS

WFDSS is designed to include models and tools to analyze and assess the incident. The outputs can then be used to support the decision and assist in driving strategies and future tactics. WFDSS contains the following elements-

Information
Purpose: Documents the initial and continuing fire situation, and provides required information to complete administrative fire reporting.

Situation
Purpose: Provides situational and risk assessment information to support strategic decisions and development of a course of action. Information on fire weather, features, values, fire danger, and more can be accessed. The information obtained here can help assess whether the pre-planned initial response is accurate or if additional planning is needed for the fire.

Objectives
Purpose: Defines objectives as stated in Land & Resource (LRMP), and Fire Management Plans (FMP) and lists specific management and incident requirements that will frame and influence strategic decisions and tactical implementation. This information is loaded prior to the fire season as provided in the LRMP and FMPs. If spatially enabled, this list will be reflective of the fire location and the relevant plan information.

Course of Action
Purpose: Defines a specific course of action ranging from a pre-planned initial response to an individualized response for a specific situation. Specificity varies with fire complexity and can include a defined planning area, management actions, resource commitments, and costs for the fire duration.

Validation
Purpose: Provides a review of the Situation, Objectives, and Course of Action to ensure that Objectives can be met, and in the event they cannot be met, the Validation guides the development of a new Course of Action.

Decision Summary
Purpose: Documents the response decision, the rationale for that decision, and stipulates the timeframe for revisiting and reassessing the decision.

Periodic Assessment
Purpose: Provides a process to periodically review the current decision, response, and accomplishments to evaluate effectiveness and confirm accuracy or, if needed, indicate progression to a higher response level and associated planning activities.

Reports
Purpose: Enables you to create three types of reports for your incidents. These reports are useful for conducting inbriefs and other meetings, as well as for preparing after action reviews and post-fire reclamation plans.

WFDSS Resources
Numerous models and tools are available within WFDSS to assist with the above mentioned functional areas.

Models in WFDSS
- Fire Behavior and Fire Spread Models (Basic, Short Term, Near Term, FSPro)
- Stratified Cost Index (SCI)
- Wildland Fire Air Quality Tools and Smoke Models

Tools in WFDSS
- Relative Risk Assessment
- Organizational Needs
- Fire Danger Graphs
- Weather forecasts
- Values Inventory
- KMZ downloads

Models and tools in WFDSS automatically pull in weather, landscape and fuel moisture data. There are readily available technical experts that can assist in running these models and defining outputs for your incident. These models can and should be used to support decision making and are often incorporated in to the decision documentation.

Training aids are available on the WFDSS site on the Training tab. http://wfdss.usgs.gov/wfdss/WFDSS_Training.shtml To help users become familiar with navigating in the program WFDSS 101 series is an excellent source for learning how to use WFDSS.

Exercise

Review the various decision elements from the Buckhead WFDSS Decision. Determine if the elements are adequate and if sufficient information is provided to guide an Incident Management Organization in managing this fire. It is recommended that you access the Buckhead incident 2012 in the Production site on WFDSS http://wfdss.usgs.gov/wfdss/WFDSS_Home.shtml After signing into WFDSS, click on the Incidents tab. Using the Incident List Filter, type in "Buckhead" in the Incident Name box and "2012" in the Incident Year box and click Find Incidents. Click on the radio button next to Buckhead, then View Information. Click on the Situation tab to view the incident map. If the various elements are not visible they can be activated from the left Map Layers menu. The Objectives tab can be found at the top of the page in the second row of tabs.
The Buckhead_081112_1323_Decision PDF may be used if access to WFDSS is not available.

VI. SUMMARY

Management of wildland fire represents one of the most complex and highest risk activities in land management. Decision support and its contributions to decision-making are vital to fire management success. Decision support tools range from subjective information to quantitative long-term analysis processes and provide information to decision-makers. These tools and processes incorporate science and technology to assist in decision making based on the best available information.

Decision support give managers the ability to reduce the amount of uncertainty surrounding the fire, understand the amount of difficulty that could be encountered during management and possible outcomes, develop management strategies and operational tactics and provide a common understanding and clearer explanation of the situation.

Your input to the in the decision analysis can be key in the success of managing an incident and providing for firefighter safety.